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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NASSAU 002321

SIPDIS

PRM FOR NANCY IRIS

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SUBJECT: CHALLENGES OF ILLEGAL MIGRATION; CAN THE BAHAMAS  
MANAGE?

Classified By: CHARGE ROBERT M. WITAJEWSKI FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Nancy Iris, Deputy Director for the Bureau of Population, Refugee and Migration (PRM) visited Nassau from October 13 - October 17, 2003. The Political Officer and Ms. Iris attended meetings with various government officials, members from NGOs, and toured the migrant detention center in Nassau. With U.S. Coast Guard assistance, Ms. Iris was also able to visit Great Inagua, an island strategically located on the southern flank of the Bahamas, in an area particularly vulnerable to the passage of migrants and contraband. A small, temporary migrant facility has been established on Great Inagua, and The Bahamas has proposed constructing a larger, more permanent, and better-equipped detention center along with a military base on the island. Ms. Iris concluded that a necessary first step in the process would be preparation of a master plan and cost estimate for new facilities on Great Inagua prior to USG consideration of any investment. Ms. Iris also began a dialogue with Bahamian officials regarding the development of a contingency plan in case of a large influx in migration. Government and non-government representatives welcomed this proposal, admitting The Bahamas has no such plan in place.  
End Summary.

DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION UNPREPARED FOR MASS MIGRATION

2. (C) Nancy Iris was able to elicit candid responses from the Director of Immigration Vernon Burrows regarding the Bahamian lack of planning or resources available if a spike in the level of migration should occur. He admitted, "Migration is a scary issue for us. We can't handle more (migrants) than we already have." According to Burrows, the detention center on Carmichael Road in Nassau has the capacity to house 500 migrants indoors, with enough land to erect tents to provide shelter for an additional 500 detainees. Currently in this Detention Center there are just under 200 people being detained, the majority being Haitians and Cubans. If there should be a sudden increase in these numbers, there is no GCOB (Government of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas) plan for how to attain the additional food, beds, or shelter. Burrows suggested that GCOB has no contingency plan for a spike in migration, although this was disputed by other government officials who claimed that a draft plan is under preparation.

3. (C) Senior Immigration Official Mechelle Martinez-Amor explained the complexity and inefficiency of processing asylum request in The Bahamas. Once Ms. Martinez-Amor, or one of her very few trained colleagues, has completed the interview, the information is sent to UNHCR in Washington for an assessment of the case. Their recommendation is then forwarded to the Department of Immigration, who then passes it to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Cabinet approval. She admits that this is a slow and laborious process, especially given that the final designation must be made by Cabinet, an unusually high level of decision making for such a determination.

4. (C) Ms. Martinez-Amor told Ms. Iris that where Cubans are automatically pre-screened for asylum, Haitians must request the interview. Few Haitians actually request an interview for asylum, perhaps because they believe their efforts would be futile. Haitians are also at a disadvantage in the interview process because there is no full-time Creole-speaker at the detention center, and despite relatively high Haitian migrants' rate of illiteracy, there is limited help in filling out the requisite forms for seeking asylum. For calendar year 2002, only four migrants were given refugee status, according to Bahamian officials.

SALVATION ARMY AND OFDA NOT IMPRESSED WITH GOVERNMENT PLANNING

5. (C) Major Raphael Mason, Director of the Salvation Army in The Bahamas and local UNHCR representative, told Ms. Iris that he had made an offer to the Director of Immigration Vernon Burrows to provide meals and support for the detention center if the number of detainees exceeded the facility's capacity. The Salvation Army currently operates a daily

feeding program for 60-100 people. The Salvation Army head disagreed with Immigration Head Burrows' assessment that the detention center could hold up to 1,000 migrants. Mason also requested that UNHCR representatives come to The Bahamas to do an awareness program on migrant issues.

16. (C) Ms. Beryl M. Armbrister, consultant to the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), provided insight into the government perspective of contingency planning. She noted that the head of the National Disaster Planning Commission is Mr. Carl Smith, Under Secretary of Finance in the Prime Minister's office. Because this organization is not formal or legislated, and Mr. Smith's position is not permanent, Ms. Armbrister believes that this organization lacks continuity and effectiveness. She proposes that this organization apply for a more formal status by achieving a legislated mandate under the Cabinet. Political Officer learned that such a proposal is working its way slowly through the Bahamian system. Apparently, it is "stuck" in the Attorney General's office.

#### DISCONNECT WITHIN GOVERNMENT REGARDING MIGRATION ISSUES AND GREAT INAGUA

17. (C) Mr. Peter Deveaux-Isaacs, the Under Secretary at the Ministry of National Security, is convinced of the necessity for The Bahamas to develop a base on Great Inagua for the Royal Bahamas Defence Force. Great Inagua is strategically located 50 nautical miles north of the Windward Passage, the maritime choke point between Haiti and Cuba. Much of the contraband smuggled through the Caribbean, be it migrants or drugs, is smuggled through the Windward Passage. Deveaux-Isaacs acknowledged that "as a sovereign nation, we can't always expect people to do things for us", referring to OPBAT and Coast Guard operations. If possible he would like to build a multipurpose facility in Great Inagua to house 500-600 people.

18. (C) The southern flank of The Bahamas is a "nightmare to patrol", but with a fueling station at Great Inagua, Deveaux-Isaacs thinks the Defence Force could save a great deal of resources that are currently wasted by travel time to Nassau for refueling and crew rest. Deveaux-Isaacs expressed a hesitancy to use the U.S. Naval Facility at Guantanamo Bay to refuel because he fears that utilization of this option might lead the USG to conclude that The Bahamas does not need to develop Great Inagua, relying instead on GTMO, and be less than forthcoming with assistance as a result. Unlike his many counterparts in the government, Deveaux-Isaacs seems to believe that a Great Inagua based could be developed without U.S. assistance.

19. (U) The migrants that are detained in Great Inagua now are held at the small RBDF site on the island adjoining the airport. Because of its very limited resources, all effort is made to repatriate these migrants within 48 hours. Although strategically located to interdict Haitian migrants, the shallow marine basin in Great Inagua is incapable of handling any US Coast Guard vessels. As a result, migrants must be shuttled off cutters to the island via small boats.

110. (C) Ms. Donna Lowe, the Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Legal Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gave a much different perspective than Immigration Director Vernon Burrows regarding a migration and natural disaster contingency plan. According to Lowe, not only did she recommend that migration be taken into consideration after attending a UNHCR meeting in Miami in December 2002, but she also indicated that a plan to incorporate this contingency is in an advanced stage of preparation. Apparently the Government of the Bahamas went to the University of Southern Florida to request assistance in this process. She admitted, however, that getting the draft legislation is a slow process because it was not very high on the priority list at the Attorney General's office.

111. (C) Ms. Lowe claims to have encouraged the Attorney General to make a migration contingency plan because both UNHCR and Amnesty International have continuously criticized The Bahamas for the treatment of migrants and the lack of a coherent plan for the future. Although it wasn't to be distributed to the public until November 5, Lowe had seen an advanced copy of the new Amnesty International report on The Bahamas, and she admitted it is extremely critical of the government's handling of migration and detention issues.

#### DETENTION CENTER NEEDS FUNDING

111. (C) The Detention Center on Carmichael Road in Nassau appears inadequate in terms of space and services for the number of detainees currently housed there. On the day of Ms. Iris' visit, there were a total of 156 migrants being detained. Of these there were 56 Haitians and 80 Cubans with the balance made up of migrants from Venezuela, Honduras,

Jamaica, Ecuador, Nigeria, China, Cape Verde, the Netherlands, and Dominican Republic. Haitians typically are repatriated much more quickly than other nationalities at an average of 5 days. Cubans tend to be detained on average for approximately 6 to 8 months at a time while the Bahamian government negotiates with the Cuban government for their repatriation. Children held at this facility are given no access to education even if their length of stay extends for several months. Limited healthcare, restricted access to outside communication and legal advice, difficulty in obtaining toiletries and necessary clothing, and small food portions are the main complaints from migrants.

112. (C) Five large cinder-block huts sit on the Detention Center land holding approximately 65 beds each. The Department of Immigration handles the administrative tasks at the detention center, and the Royal Bahamas Defence Force handles all security issues. Although a doctor was originally scheduled to be on-site on a daily basis, the Chief Immigration Officer Hubert Ferguson said in actuality the doctor pays weekly visits to the center. Relatives can visit during visitation hours and bring goods.

113. (C) Should the Detention Center ever receive a large increase in its numbers, Ferguson admitted that the sewage and plumbing systems, security and the current food distribution method would be woefully inadequate. The Detention Center currently offers no opportunity for recreation for the migrants. There is no television, books, or any other form of entertainment. Some of the migrants are held at this center for months at a time with little contact to the outside world. Ferguson admitted a fear of an uprising should the migrants' numbers increase. Various ethnic groups of different languages and cultures are held in the same dorms at a time.

114. (SBU) "Bahamas: Forgotten Detainees? Human Rights in Detention", an Amnesty International Report released on November 5, 2003, paralleled Embassy observations of the conditions in the Carmichael Detention Center. Bahamian Government officials have defensively responded that these reports were "unbalanced" while acknowledging that they are trying to improve both prison and detention facilities. (septel)

#### COMMENT

115. (C) GCOB officials in the Ministries of Labour and Immigration, Foreign Affairs and National Security all agreed that The Bahamas needs to add a mass migration contingency component to its ongoing natural disaster planning. This idea was also supported by the Salvation Army, which identified areas in which it could be helpful in the event of such an emergency, and by AID/OFDA's regional consultant. To date, the GCOB has taken its first wobbling step in this direction by moving to make its national disaster-planning group an official and legislated office.

116. (C) The state of planning to develop Great Inagua into a larger detention center with an augmented facility for the Royal Bahamas Defence Force depends heavily upon whom you talk within the Bahamian government. Although all are in agreement that Great Inagua -- geographically close to both Haiti and Cuba -- is perfectly located for both a re-fueling station and migrant detention center, many are doubtful that the Bahamian government will be able to commit sufficient resources to even initiate and see to fruition such a massive project given other, equally compelling, demands on its limited resources. Prime Minister Christie argued to President Bush at their breakfast meeting in New York City recent breakfast meeting for help in developing Great Inagua. The benefits of this development are numerous, but a major investment would be required to expand the harbor, dredge an entrance and construct a breakwater, build the detention center, upgrade airport facilities, and construct the needed infrastructure to provide communications water, electricity, and waste disposal. Prior agreement on the conditions under which the USG could use these facilities would also be required and is likely to be a lengthy process as well.

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